

Building the Temple of God on a Firm Foundation
(1 Corinthians 3)

The Rev. Dr. L. Gregory Bloomquist
St. Peter and Paul's Anglican Church Ottawa / Church of the Messiah Ottawa
15th Sunday after Trinity
September 16, 2012

When Paul wrote the letter that we call 1 Corinthians to the very young Christian community in the Greek city of Corinth, it was likely only the third occasion for him to speak to the young Christians in that city.

The first occasion had been perhaps just a few weeks or months before he wrote this letter. It was on that occasion on which he had first come to Corinth. During the time of his preaching in the city during that first visit, some Corinthians had turned to God. Some were Jews, who now turned to God as made known by His Son. Some were Gentiles, who turned from many gods, to the one God whom Jews had always known in some form but who had now made Himself known perfectly in His Son. In fact, the majority of those who had turned to God were likely Gentiles, some of whom were residents of Corinth but many of whom would have been residents of other cities and countries simply passing through Corinth on their way to something better. Some of these were quite well off, or at least well off enough that they could have slaves.

What did they do when they became followers of Christ? We also get a good picture of how difficult it was, during these first weeks or months of being Christians, for them to figure out how to figure out what to do. We know this for two reasons.

First, because between this first visit of Paul to Corinth and this letter that we have and that we call 1 Corinthians, Paul had actually already written to them, a previous letter. Paul refers to this letter in our 1 Corinthians. He writes to the Corinthians in 1 Cor 5:9 that he has already written to them once. In that letter, Paul reminds them here, he had attempted to help them know how to preserve their purity in Christ by keeping away from those who called themselves Christians but who didn't show any change in their character from what they had once been: idolaters, revilers, drunkards, or robbers.

Second, we know from this letter of Paul that we now call 1 Corinthians that the Corinthians still had many questions for Paul, obvious questions for a community that had no idea what "following Christ" actually meant when it was lived out. Should we continue to marry? Have sex? Even touch a woman? Should we continue to eat meat, since it means going to our former temples to buy it? What exactly should we do when we gather together to seek the God that you have made known to us? Should we eat together? Should we pray together? How should we pray? Can the women pray, since normally they can't in our own temples? What about those who are sick and on the verge of death? What will happen to them if Christ doesn't return before they die?

What all this suggests is that, in the earliest days of the Christian community, there was much confusion regarding what it meant to be a Christian and how to live that out. For us, it is obvious what we are supposed to do, isn't it? But, for them? Well, how could it have been. It was all new to them. It appears that they were unclear just exactly what was supposed to change in a person's life. Apparently, they felt that you could still continue to buy meat offered to idols, that you could still swear and carry on at parties, that you could still continue to drink to excess. Why, it isn't even clear that stealing, which was permitted between ethnic groups, had to stop.

This should raise an important question in our minds: what had these residents in Corinth believed when they believed?

Paul gets to that in this letter that we call First Corinthians but that we can now see is actually the third occasion on which he speaks to these young Christians. The occasion is also clear from this letter. Word had come to Paul that these Christians residing in Corinth were becoming more and more divided among themselves and were actually starting to fight among themselves and to meet separately from each other. They were starting to form factions: some were asserting that they were followers of Peter, who must have either come to Corinth or who must have had adherents among those aliens who now found themselves in Corinth after travelling there from, say, Israel; others were followers of Apollos, a great speaker and former disciple of John the Baptist; others continued to adhere to what Paul had preached to them. In other words, they appear to have started to gather around whichever leader seemed to them most appropriate.

This was only natural, wasn't it, in the absence of any strong, apostolic leadership that was based in Corinth. All you had were apostles coming and going. But among young Christians there is a natural desire to know how to live the Christian life and in the absence of strong, mature leadership anything is possible: some may decide to do almost anything, while others will gravitate to the strongest leadership that presents itself.

And so in this letter that we call 1 Corinthians Paul reminds the believers what they had first believed in when they received the Gospel. And it was NOT anything that any leader could call his own.

For example, Paul says that he had not come to Corinth to become their local pastor and to initiate them through baptism into an institutional church. No, rather, Paul says, God had sent him to Corinth to proclaim the Gospel to those who had not yet heard about Christ.

But, Paul goes on to say, God did not send him to proclaim the Gospel in Corinth with words, but rather ...

Note: Paul doesn't finish his thought. In 1 Cor 1:18 he leaves the readers of his letter with an unfinished thought. Instead, in the rest of chapter 1, he goes on to tell the Corinthians the reason that God did not send him to be an evangelist who would convince people with wonderfully eloquent words. The reason is: God did not want the cross of Christ to take second place to Paul's eloquent speech and his philosophy of Christian living. Had Paul preached to them using his rhetorical ability or wisdom about life, he would have overshadowed the cross of Christ, which was the means by which the world was being saved from destruction by God.

And so it is that it is only in the second chapter of First Corinthians that Paul picks up his unfinished thought. God did not send me to proclaim the Gospel in Corinth with eloquent words but rather ... aha, there it is in 2:4 through the signs and wonders accomplished by the Spirit of God. It has taken Paul the whole of one chapter and part of a second to remind the Corinthians of how they became Christians: not through persuasive words of rhetorical training or of the philosophy of Christian living but through miracles that no human could achieve on his own, no matter who he was.

Accordingly, Paul goes on to tell them, the foundation on which they were building their community, the body of Christ, was not a philosophical one, it was not one of skilled pastoral guidance for a Christian life-style... Paul reminded them that their foundation was very simply the unimpeachable works of God Himself in the form of miraculous events that no one could deny or explain away and which were happening because the name of Christ was spoken.. For Paul miracles are not for their own sake, or simply the result of intensive prayer; miracles are God's means of opening the eyes and hearts of people and providing convincing evidence of who this Jesus is. These miraculous deeds had overwhelmed Jewish believers who suddenly saw before themselves in their own day the mighty deeds that their fathers had told them Moses had done in his day. But, they had also overwhelmed Gentile believers who had no explanation for the kinds of things that were happening around Paul and the other apostles. What these residents in Corinth had seen was God, through His Son, working miracles and bringing them to reject all other claims to their allegiance.

Paul had left them with these miracles weeks, perhaps months ago, and how had they done practicing this miracles in their midst. Not very well. Paul tells them here, in chapter 3, that when he had first encountered them and God had done miracles through him, they were like children. That was to be expected. But, now, here, weeks or months later, unfortunately they still are. So, he says, that he is still forced to speak to them not as those who are now living their lives in the full power of the Spirit, themselves doing miracles to convince fellow Corinthians of the truth of the Gospel, but rather that they are still living according to the world's own standards of what makes for enjoyment (drinking and revelry) or success (theft and idolatry).

So, Paul writes to them, let me remind you of what you have seen at the hands of those of us whom you follow, we apostles, those in whom the work of God is clearly present, as you admit. We are nothing! We are nothing more than vessels for the Spirit of God. We are nothing in and of ourselves. We claim no apostolic authority or apostolic identity independently of the miraculous actions of God in us. I, Paul writes, am nothing in and of myself: it is God who is doing the work in me that you have come to believe in and to follow. Not me.

And so it is with all those who receive God through me, Paul writes: they, too, are nothing in and of themselves. They are simply vessels in which God can make His power known. So, you Corinthians and residents in Corinth who have come to believe in God and who manifest in your lives the power of God: remember, you are nothing in yourselves; you never were and you still aren't. But you are something through the work of God in you! Now, through the work of God in you, you, like me, writes Paul, are the essential building blocks of the new Temple of God. The very Temple of God where man is being reconciled to God.

What a shock this must have been to both Jews and Gentiles in Corinth. The Jews had known the glorious temple in Jerusalem. They would have said with Peter and James and John: Look what marvelous stones make up this building. Now, however, Paul says to the Corinthians: You are the stones of a much more glorious Temple, a new temple in which God is reconciling not just Jews to God but the whole world to Himself. But this is only by God's grace and by God's grace alone, only because of what He is doing in and through you and us. So, don't boast. Don't look at us and boast about us. Look to God, the author and finisher of your salvation. He alone is worthy of praise. It is only through Him by His Holy Spirit that we can be a people of praise, holy to His name. It is nothing that we have done of ourselves.

The same is true of us here. We have our leaders. We look at exalted Christians in our midst and regularly cite them or quote them. But my friends, we are the living stones in the living Temple of God and it is of us that God expects signs and wonders to be performed as others are drawn to this Temple to be reconciled to God. What are we becoming through God's grace showered on us in Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit? Would Paul have to speak to us as children or would Paul delight in speaking to us as men and women coming to full maturity in Christ?